

VZCZCXRO5094
RR RUEHDBU RUEHPW RUEHSL
DE RUEHBUL #3737/01 3260305
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 220305Z NOV 09
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3329
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 003737

DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM
STATE PASS TO AID FOR ASIA/SCAA
USFOR-A FOR POLAD

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#) [ECON](#)

SUBJECT: RECLAIMING ARGHANDAB: THE GATEWAY TO KANDAHAR

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Kandahar's most pivotal district has a chance of significantly improved governance because U.S. military and civilian experts are on the ground at a district level, preparing the way for Afghan government engagement and working to reverse years of government neglect. Through a combination of continued development programs, improvements in Afghan-led security, and new authorities for the district governance, we can increase the prospect of keeping the Taliban at bay in the Arghandab valley. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On November 15, Ambassador Eikenberry visited the District Support Team (DST) and met with district leaders in Arghandab, a district north of Kandahar along the fertile Arghandab river valley.

The DST is a model of civ-mil cooperation. It is supporting the development of district governance, which is beginning to coalesce in a manner that gives some hope to the area. Arghandab is a district in the balance. Still far removed from the national government and with little support from the Kandahar provincial government, the fertile and scenic area is heavily contested by the Taliban. Their chosen tactic has been assassinations designed to weaken and divide the tribes. Arghandab is the temporary home of Stryker Brigade 5/2, which has fought hard and suffered 22 killed in action in 2009. Recent fragile progress shows USG and Afghan efforts in Arghandab may turn out to be a model of how to build district capacity to deliver security and welfare: the military invited civilians to be part of the effort from the beginning; USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives (USAID/OTI) staff were integrated during the shape phase; innovative joint USG civ-mil efforts have led to sustained, synchronized development programming by USAID's AVIPA-plus agriculture voucher program and the Strategic Provincial Roads program. These programs are augmenting ongoing OTI and CERP activities at the district levels and are helping to build an Afghan-led process. They should continue. Local leaders are beginning to work together, building the government from the ground up, as evident through the growing influence of the weekly shura which is increasingly vocal about standing against the Taliban.

¶3. (SBU) District leader Haji Abdul Jabar recently visited Nagahan, located on the west bank of the Arghandab river, formerly a no-go zone. He attended the local shura to listen to grievances. This visit led to elders from Nagahan attending the regular shura meetings in Arghandab, including six at the most recent shura with the Ambassador (see para 4). This is a major development as it brings communities on the west bank of the river into the district's governance. In the past month the Arghandab district center has seen an increase in the number of constituents approaching the district center with grievances, a positive development that indicates public recognition of the district "government."

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador met with a shura of 30-35 district leaders during the visit to the DST. The Ambassador told participants that U.S. and ISAF military and civilians were committed to working with them on rule of law and development, and stressed that these were key to local and national security. He said the United States had made many sacrifices, including the loss of 20 soldiers and over 40 wounded in Arghandab. Now, it is time for the citizens of the district to do their part to help their own community. We are

committed to this mission, but we need your help - we can't stay forever, he told the shura. He informed the district leaders the United States was committed to their security, but that we would rather spend a billion dollars on development than on security. "Please treat our soldiers like your own sons. If you do this, we will fight with you."

¶5. (SBU) Tribal leader Karimullah (age 27) and the chief of police were both present among the shura (comment: a good demonstration of some level of unity; end comment). Shura leaders spoke out against the Taliban, saying "if they take over, the whole area will collapse." Some of the Taliban were locally recruited, but most were from outside the area, they explained. The leaders admitted the disorganization of the tribes had allowed the Taliban to gain ground, but added that "tribes need protection." Shura participants listed a number of priority needs including: road construction, fruit processing companies, reopening of electricity and cell phone towers, basic education and health services. People of the district were disappointed by Kabul - "we need local people for local problems."

Security Capacity Needs Focus

¶6. (SBU) ANSF capacity is weak in Arghandab. There is a nine-to-one U.S. to ANA troop ratio. When the ANA conducts operations, they bring only 20 to 40 troops, when they need over ¶100. There are three companies of ANA operating in the Arghandab area of operation, but the overall commander is in Kandahar. The 82nd Airborne has begun police training, but there is still a severe shortage of ANP.

¶7. (SBU) Arghandab DST staffing is currently one USAID/OTI officer,
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one State Rep (Democracy and Governance), and a USFOR-A Civil Affairs Team.

Extraordinary Measures From Kabul Also Needed

¶8. (SBU) Comment. In addition to security and development support and engagement at the local level, district governments such as Arghandab also need support from Kabul to build their capacities to deliver. This would require extraordinary measures to take advantage of a short window of opportunity: giving district governments limited authorities to hire personnel and pay higher wages with the goal of assembling 5-6 key ministry representatives to deliver key services including dispute resolution. End Comment.

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